'Frogmen' Blew Up a French Ship in Havana

By PAUL MESKIL

Last of a series

At 3:10 p.m. on March 4, 1960, a French munitions ship blew up in Havana harbor, killing at least 75 people and injuring more than 200.

The vessel, Le Couvre, exploded during the unloading of 76 tons of ammunition and grenades intended for Fidel Castro's military and police forces. Castro suspected sabotage, but couldn't prove it. The United States denied any involvement in the incident.

A former CIA agent told The News recently that Le Couvre was sabotaged by "CIA frogmen." He said an underwater demolition team slipped into the water at night and attached a bomb to the ship's hull, under the waterline. The bomb, a detonater and a timing device were in a waterproof container, he said.

The ex-agent added that the frogmen were Cubans working for the CIA. "It was definitely a CIA-connected thing," he said.

Another source said the bomb was supposed to go off around 3 a.m., when the waterfront was deserted, but something went wrong with the timer and the blast came 12 hours later, when the area was crowded with dock workers and harbor traffic.

Still another source, formerly connected with the CIA and other intelligence agencies in the Caribbean area, blamed the big blast on Gen. Rafael Trujillo, then dictator of the Dominican Republic.

Trujillo and his sinister intelligence chief, Johnny Abbes, had many conferences with CIA officials and secret agents. On one occasion in 1960, Trujillo offered CIA agents Frank Sturgis and Pedro Diaz Lanz, former chief of Castro's Air Force, $1 million to lead an invasion of Cuba from the Dominican Republic. Diaz Lanz declined, telling his CIA bosses that he didn't want to work for another dictator.

Plotting to kill Trujillo

While in the Dominican Republic to confer with Trujillo in 1961, Sturgis also contacted Dominican military officers who were plotting to kill Trujillo. The CIA agreed to give the plotters guns and ammunition.

"The guns arrived in boxes sent to a supermarket in Ciudad Trujillo (the Dominican capital, now called Santo Domingo)," said Frank Nelson, an American who worked with Trujillo in a plot to overthrow Castro. "The Dominican officers didn't need the guns. They already had enough stuff for a war. They needed the moral support of the U.S. government, and this was represented by the arms shipments."

The rebel officers assassinated Trujillo on May 30, 1961. Whether they used the CIA guns has not been disclosed. But similar weapons figured in subsequent attempts to exterminate Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier, the voodoo Hitler of Haiti.

On the night of Aug. 26, 1963, a converted B-25 bomber left Florida with an arms shipment for Gen. Leon Cantava, a former Haitian Army commander who was planning to invade his homeland from the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti. The CIA plane swooped over a flare-lit field near the Dominican military airport of Dajabon.

Wooden crates rained down on parachutes. They contained mortars, bazookas, M-1 rifles, .30-caliber machineguns, M-3 tommyguns, .45-caliber pistols, grenades and ammunition.

The weapons were distributed among 210 Haitian exiles who comprised Cantava's invasion army. They crossed the Massacre River, borderline between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, on the night of Sept. 22. Late the following day, after a bloody battle with Haitian troops, Cantava led the remnants

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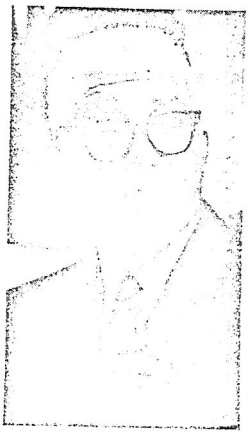
SECRETS OF THE CIA



Duvalier: The rebels got CIA guns

PLOT TO RELEASE THE PUEBLO

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of his rebel band back across the river to their Dominican sanctuary.

A week later, a small group of Haitian refugees entered a U.S. Army Special forces camp in North Carolina for training in guerrilla warfare. Most of the Haitians were in their early 20s and had attended college in the United States after service in the U.S. Army or Air Force. All of them lived in New York City.

They had been hand-picked by the CIA for what became one of the bravest and most pitiful invasions in the history of Caribbean carnage.

The invasion force consisted of only 13 men, eight of whom had been trained by the Green Berets. They belonged to an anti-Duvalier group called Jeune Haiti (Young Haiti). Nearly all of the unlucky 13 were the sons of Haitian military officers or officials who had been killed by Duvalier's thugs.

The leader, Gusle Villedrouin, was a former U.S. airman whose father, Haitian Army Col. Roger Villadrouin, was clubbed to death by Papa Doc's Tonton Macoutes.

They chartered a boat in Florida and landed in Haiti on Aug. 5, 1961, carrying a variety of weapons supplied by CIA agents. Although the invasion was doomed to failure before it began, the 13 young New Yorkers managed to hold off hundreds of Duvalier soldiers, militiamen and Tonton Macoutes.

They were killed one by one, and those who were left kept fighting. The last three invaders ran out of ammunition on Oct. 26, then threw stones at the troops who gunned them down. The heads of all 13 were cut off and sent to the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince.

Drops two gasoline drums

On May 29, 1968, a B-25 flew over Duvalier's palace and dropped two gasoline drums, one of which blew a hole in the street outside the Haitian White House. The other did not explode. The plane was piloted by an American who reportedly had done contract jobs for the CIA.

A much more imaginative, though no more successful, CIA plot was simmering on another burner at this time. Its aim was the release of the U.S.S. Pueblo and her crew, captured by communist North Korea in January, 1968.

CIA officials named the Pueblo project "Operation Sword," but those who took part refer to it as "the Mexican thing." It went from the planning stage to the recruiting stage in the summer of 1968, when a classified ad appeared in a Ft. Lauderdale newspaper, offering "adventure" and "high pay" to qualified applicants.

The ad was placed by Ray Sandstrom, a Ft. Lauderdale lawyer who allegedly had worked for the CIA as a pilot. About 60 men answered the ad and Sandstrom forwarded the letters to Sturgis, who was in charge of the operation.

Sturgis had already appointed Max Gorman Gonzales, who had worked with him on previous missions, as security chief of the project. From the letters and personal interviews, Frank eventually picked 11 volunteers.

"They all had been in military service," Gonzales said recently. "Three had been in World War II; the others served in Korea and Vietnam. Most were young, but one was in his late 40s and had a drinking problem. He said he had never accomplished much in life and had always wanted to go on some kind of an adventure, so Frank said, 'Well, if you stay sober, we'll take you along.'

"The men were offered $10,000 for a completed assignment. They were told it was to be a commando raid into Cuba to free political prisoners from Castro's concentration camps."

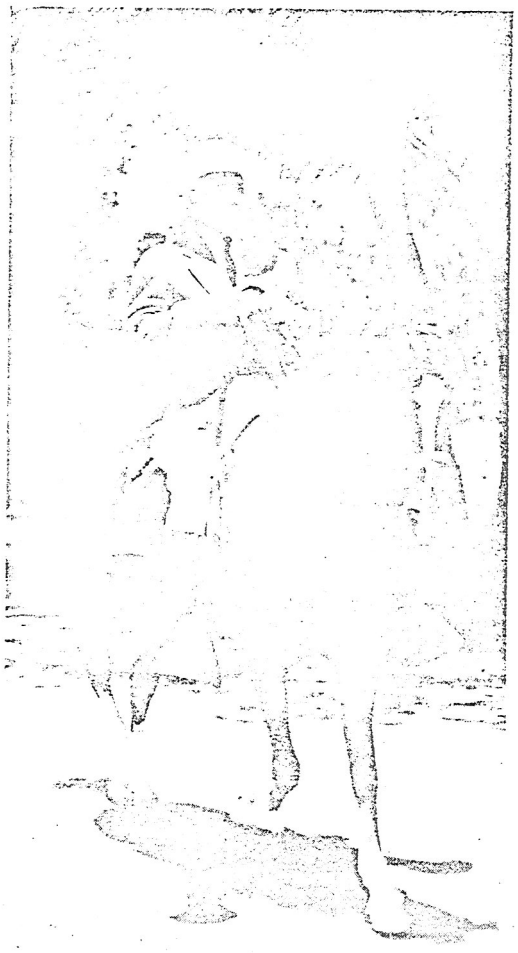
To lend credence to this story, Sturgis displayed a map showing the locations of Cuban prisons and prison camps. He also had a list of prisoners who supposedly were to be freed.

None of the men, not even Gonzales, were told the real objective.

"This operation was planned months in advance," Sturgis said. "The CIA station in Miami was aware of it. So were several other federal agencies, including the FBI and Customs.

"The objective was not to raid Cuba but to rendezvous with another ship off the coast of Mexico and, with the assistance of this ship, seize a Russian vessel. We were to meet a Cuban vessel. I as sure it was a naval vessel, commanded by Cuban navy officers who were simpatico with Castro.

"Two orders (for completing the operation) were aboard the Cuban ship. The captain also held a sailor schedule listing arrivals and departures of all Soviet and communistbloc vessels in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. We hoped to grab a Soviet 'fishing boat' that was [illegible]



Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, offered $1 million for a Cuban invasion.

In the Caribbean, the CIA got involved in dozens of schemes, including blowing up a French ship and killing Trujillo

stopped by the Cuban vessel. The skipper of the Soviet ship probably would not be suspicious of a boarding party wearing Cuban Navy uniforms.

"We would then capture the ship. We were to take it to a point off the coast of Venezuela. The orders were not to go into any port but to stay off the coast. Certain officials in the Venezuelan government were aware of the plan. They would participate in negotiations for the release of the captured ship and its crew. A statement would be issued to the effect that we wanted to exchange the ship and crew for certain political prisoners in Cuba.

"But that was a ruse. Then we would go into the second phase of the operation, to [illegible] with the Russians and North Koreans for the release of the U.S.S. Pueblo, its captain and crew, who were still in confinement at this time.

"We were going to threaten to sink the communist ship and kill all the hostages if any ship of any country came close. It was supposed to look like a pirate operation, organized by American mercenaries and anti-Castro Cubans."

In preparation for the trip to Mexico, guns, camping equipment, medicine, bandages, uniforms and other supplies were hidden in door panels, seats and a false trunk of a 1962 Falcon that was outfitted by the mechanics of a Miami garage owned by two CIA employees.

The volunteers were to provide their own transportation to Mexico and their own weapons and camping gear.

"The men had to get to the meeting place, Guadalajara, at their own expense," Gonzales said. "The contract didn't go into effect until they got there. How they got there was their business."

Running out of money

One of the recruits, Robert Curtis, later testified in a court case resulting from the operation: "When we got to Guadalajara, the hotel we were supposed to go to was torn down. We went across the street to Los Americanos (another hotel). We left the car parked out front where he (Sturgis) could see it. We waited three weeks and we were running out of money... so we went to a gun shop and sold my Japanese Nambu (automatic pistol) for about $30."

Frank and the rest of the gang eventually arrived and proceeded to a training camp Gonzales had set up in the mountains near the Guatemala border. It rained much of the time they were there and they called their base Camp Muc.

After two weeks there, they moved to Camp Sand on the beach near the Yucatan fishing village of Progreso. They chartered the fishing boat Amigo, smuggled guns and ammo aboard, and set off to met the Cuban vessel. But the charts they had obtained to guide them through the Gulf and Caribbean were 16 years old and, therefore, not completely accurate.

They cruised south along the Yucatan coast for four days, entered Central American waters and then ran aground on a reef two miles off Belize, capital of British Honduras.

"We threw a lot of gear over the side," Gonzales said. "We waited until the tide came in. Then everybody jumped into the water to help get her off the reef although there were sharks around. We didn't intend to go into Belize but the propeller and shaft were bent and there was a small leak. We were taking on water and needed repairs."

When the Amigo limped into port, flying no flag, police and customs officers boarded her. British Honduran authorities at first thought it was an invasion from Guatemala. Sturgis and his dirty dozen were questioned by British intelligence agents. Then Sturgis spoke to the American consul and, after a few phone calls to Mexico City and Washington, the consul told him not to worry. The Americans were released and flown back to Miami.

"We was supposed to get $1,500 a month plus a $10,000 bonus (on completion of the mission)," Curtis said later. "Well, all I seen was 50 or 60 bucks to get back home (from Miami)."

"Whatever it was, it was definitely a CIA operation," said Max Gonzales, a native New Yorker who is now in business in Miami. "I think Sturgis was a CIA agent at the time and still may be. He was in contact with other CIA agents in Guadalajara and Mexico City. Frank never told us what our real mission was, but I knew it was important to the country."